

Beauty and the Beast: The Ordinary City versus the Mediatised City—The Case of Cairo

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Mennatullah Hendawy¹

Ahmed Saeed²

Abstract

Which city is made visible to those who use public versus private means of transportation? This question triggered an investigation of two alternate routes between two points in the mega urban city of Cairo, Egypt. Combining critical visual methodologies with ethnographic methods, this photo essay reveals the simultaneous existence of two cities as experienced by different publics: the 'ordinary city' of those who use public transport, and the 'mediatised city' of the elite who use private transport. Through comic-style photo editing, the essay demonstrates how the city is organised to include or exclude certain kinds of commuters using their chosen modes of transport, based on affordability and economic class.

Keywords

planning communication, mediatised city, critical visual methodology, transit mode choice, exclusivity/inclusivity, Cairo

Introduction

A city is a complex system that is constructed through the socio-economic activities of those who live in it (Batty, 2012; Bettencourt & West, 2010). We use the term 'ordinary city' to refer to the multiple layers of the city as experienced every day by the majority of its population (Hendawy, 2020). The term 'mediatised city' refers to the imagined cities articulated through communication of future urban planning and architecture projects in a certain context. This definition is inspired from the work of Hepp, Simon and Sowinska (2018). City streets are sites where people move and/or occupy the city, and ideas, resources and investments are mediated, mediatised and visualised. This is particularly the case in the current time of financialisation, mediatisation and globalisation (see Ferrando, 2018; Friedmann, 2005,

¹ Technical University Berlin, Berlin, Germany; Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt; and Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space, Erkner, Germany.

² Independent researcher.

Corresponding author:

Mennatullah Hendawy, Technical University Berlin, Straße des 17. Juni 135, 10623 Berlin, Germany.
E-mail: mennatullah.m.hendawy@tu-berlin.de

2012; Healy, 2012, 2013; Hepp & Hasebrink, 2014; McLuhan & Fiore, 1967; Watson, 2016). At a time when advertising and visual public communication have become an integral part of cities (Ferrando, 2018), Zukin, Krasnitz, and Chen (2015) argue that what distinguishes global cities from one another is what goes on at the local street level. This photo essay aims to show how the conversations that take place between those who use city streets and what is mediated to them (i.e., text and images) reflect the kind of publics that are included and excluded at the local street level and hence the values of the city at the planning level.

In order to capture some of these conversations, we identified two well-used alternative routes in the Greater Cairo Region,¹ between two points: The Girls College in Heliopolis and Tahrir Square. One of the factors that affects the choice of mode of transportation is affordability (Al-Moherz, El-Enwar, Khalil, Osman, & Ibrahim, 2016; Anwar, 2009; Beirao & Cabral, 2007), which is indicative of the economic class of the travellers. The study used a critical visual methodology (Rose, 2001), in combination with ethnographic methods, for data collection and interpretation. This helped us gain insights into the everyday encounters of these two micro publics—users of public and private transport—with the city.

The routes selected are typical of long-distance trips in Cairo (trips of more than 5 km; Ming, Song, Cheng, & You, 2015). Route 1, used by public transport commuters, extends over 14 km. Route 2, used by private transport commuters, extends over 12.7 km. Route 1 requires switching between multiple means of transport—as is often the case with public transportation in Cairo. Users of private transport spend almost 10 times the amount spent by public transport users. The trip along Route 1 costs 7–10 LE, while a trip along Route 2 costs 60–80 LE. Figure 1 illustrates the two routes, the means of transportation employed, an estimate of the trip fare and an overview of the photographs analysed in this essay. As indicated, five points on each route were selected to compare photographs of both routes.

The main research methods employed in this research were site observation and photography. We undertook this visual research as both producers and interpreters of images (Matthews, 2012; Mitchell, 2011). The primary data consists of a series of photographs taken during a field trip to Cairo in March 2019 and the secondary data comprises a critical review of literature on Cairo's urban planning, as well as socio-economic studies.

Our aim was to capture the experience of the city of Cairo through street-level mobility and motion (Normark, Cochoy, & Hagberg, 2019). Accordingly, the photographs show everyday street encounters with public and private transport across the city. The photos were taken from the window of an Uber car. The images and findings of the study are presented in the form of comic-style images. The facts and figures shared in grey boxes present the multiple, often adversarial, realities of the Egyptian street context.

Which City Is Made Visible to Those Who Use Public Versus Private Means of Transportation in Cairo?

Public transport users begin their journey from the Girls College in Heliopolis in an official minibus or an informally operated microbus. After covering about 5.6 km, they have to switch to another minibus or microbus in Cairo's central area of Abbasiya, which is almost halfway to Tahrir Square. On the other hand, private transport users stick to one mode of transportation throughout the journey—either a privately owned car or a taxi service such as Uber. Moreover, there is no fixed schedule for public transport and passengers can be picked up and dropped off at any point—in addition to bus stops—along the route.

As Figure 2 indicates, more Egyptians use public than private modes of transportation (Huzayyin & Youssef, 2013): 68 per cent versus 32 per cent in 2001 (JICA, 2002) and 69 per cent versus 31 per cent

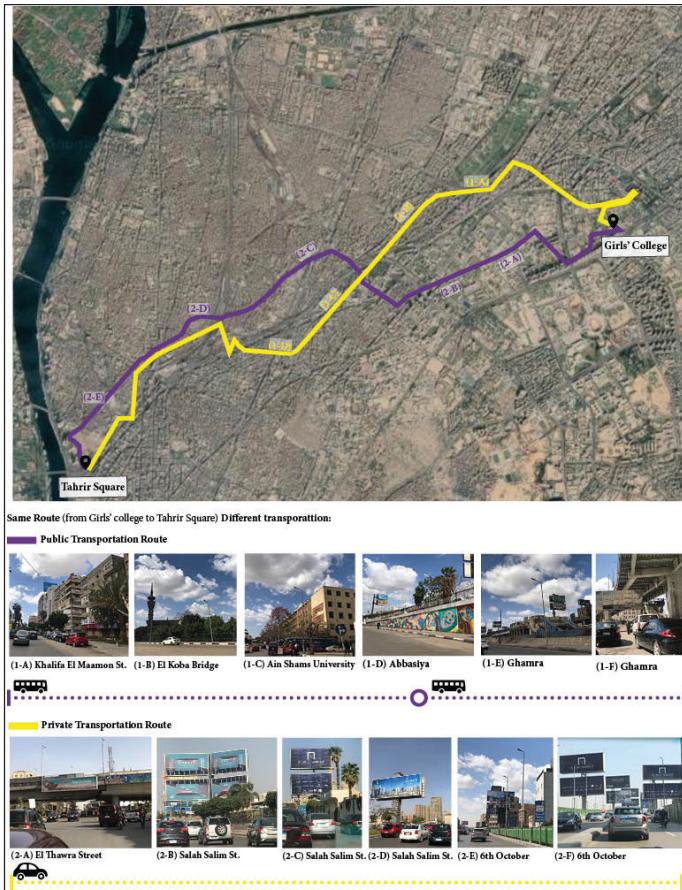


Figure 1. The Two Routes Investigated in This Study

Sources: Photos: The authors, Map: Google Earth, Icons: <https://thenounproject.com/>, Car: Rainbow Designs from the Noun Project and Bus: Jens Tärning from the Noun Project.

in 2009 (SYSTRA/DRTPC, 2009). Monthly salaries in Cairo 'range between 1,606 EGP per month (minimum salary) to 52,526 EGP per month (maximum salary). The median salary is 11,387 EGP per month, which means that half (50%) of the population are earning less than 11,387 EGP' (Salary Explorer, 2019). Furthermore, only 9.34 per cent of Egyptians own cars (Arham Online, 2017; Worldometers, 2019).

There is a marked difference in the ambience of public and private modes of transport. Commuters using Route 1 have more encounters with the city's noise, pollution and sellers of wares. Private transport commuters, on the other hand, are often isolated from the sounds of the city inside their cars, for example, while listening to the radio or speaking on their mobile phones. Route 2 passes through the 6th October Bridge—an 18.705-kilometre-long, 34-metre-wide bridge linking the most important places in Cairo and Giza (Arab Contractors, 2014)—which is accessible only by car. The bridge helps reduce travel time to some extent, especially when it is not congested. Images in Figure 3 show these data.



Figure 2. Snapshot 1 of Both Routes

Source: The authors.

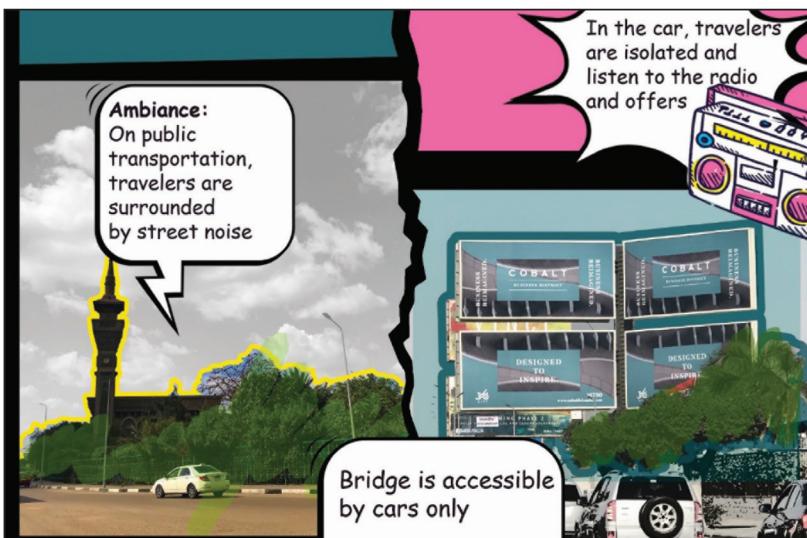


Figure 3. Snapshot 2 of Both Routes

Source: The authors.

Private transport commuters encounter more billboards along the way, full of real-estate advertisements for new-gated compounds located in new cities and with text in English, for example, 'Castle Landmark.... More Space Better Life', 'The Ridge Villas.... Elevated Life', 'La Fontaine.... Live the Waterfront' and 'Stella Park.... Every Home with a View' (Figure 4).² Given the illiteracy rate of over 25 per cent (Egyptian Streets, 2014), the use of English on these billboards reflects not only the choice of target audience but also those who are excluded. It is telling that only 2 per cent of the Egyptian population actually moves to these promoted new cities (Shawkat & Hendawy, 2016).

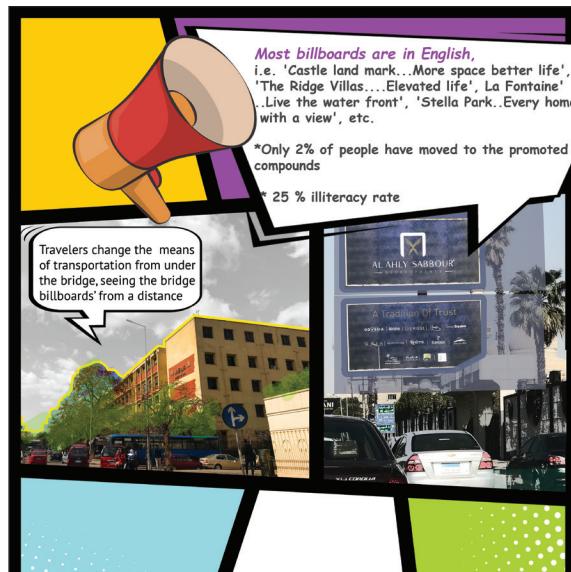


Figure 4. Snapshot 3 of Both Routes

Source: The authors.

In his article, ‘The city as advertising’, Ferrando (2018) speaks about the different media channels and methods used to market new urban developments: ‘as different as these narratives may seem, they all have to speak the language of the market. So, they are all based on the same keywords and tropes, narrative structure, claims and imaginaries. In other words: They all reproduce the same idea of city’. Development projects across the world employ almost the same keywords, such as ‘sustainable’, ‘smart’ and so on. Most real-estate advertisements in Cairo seem to ‘reproduce the urban imaginary of the dominant classes and their functional and spatial organisation’ (Ferrando, 2018).

While private transport commuters are bombarded with billboards above the bridge, public transport users are met with informal street art and graffiti along their journey under the bridge (Figure 5). At several points on Route 1, however, they can see some of the billboards from a distance.

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According to Al-Moherz et al. (2016, p. 1), ‘the criteria that influence passengers’ choices in order of importance are as follows: reliability, travel time, travel cost and comfort’. Moreover, the choice of mode of transport is usually the same for everyday trips like work and education (Huzayyin & Amer, 2007). This means that those who use private transportation do not change to public transportation and vice versa. As this essay reveals, this choice affects which city is made visible to each kind of transport user.

Commuters on Route 1—the general public who use public transport—encounter the ‘ordinary city’ through its street art, noise, public interactions and so on. Meanwhile, commuters on Route 2—the elite who use private transport—are exposed to the ‘mediatised city’. They have less travel time and more comfort but also pay more for the trip. Both groups exist in the same place but are separated by their experience of the city. This raises several questions about the diversity of the streets of Cairo, which is

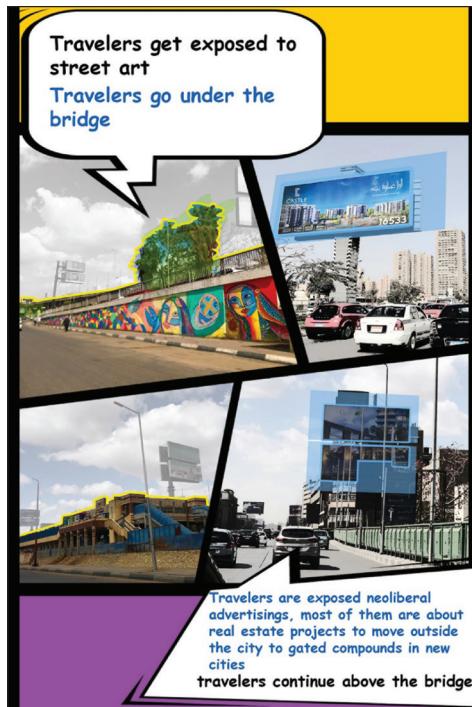


Figure 5. Snapshots 4 and 5 of Both Routes

Source: The authors.

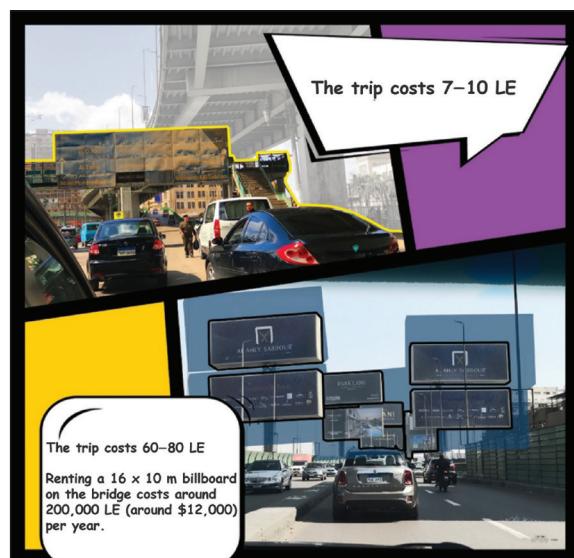


Figure 6. Snapshot 6 of Both Routes

Source: The authors.

regarded as a cosmopolitan city. According to Jane Jacob (1961), 'Tolerance ... [is] possible and normal only when streets of great cities have built-in equipment allowing strangers to dwell in peace together on civilised but essentially dignified and reserved terms' (Jacob, 1961, p. 72).

The images on the billboards that are directed to the elite public of Route 2 are far from neutral; their representation of exclusivity is part of their construction and must be comprehended 'as part of a wider cultural construction' (Berger, 1972) of socio-economic class difference. The billboards portray a financialised, mediatized and globalised Cairo (which represents around 15.7 per cent of Egyptians (Abo el Gheit, 2016)). This reflects how what is made visible says something about what is invisible, i.e. the poor. According to Rose (2001, p. 9), 'Paying attention to the effects of images is fundamental'. The author also mentions that 'images visualise (or render invisible) social difference' (Rose, 2001, p. 10).

The 'ordinary city' and the 'mediatised city' exist in parallel to each other in Cairo. This photo essay demonstrates how everyday choices such as which mode of transportation to use affect the kind of city that commuters are exposed to. In decoding the visible and invisible signs of social, spatial and economic power imbalances at the street level, it demonstrates how documenting daily urban encounters can ignite discussions about inclusivity and exclusivity in the city.

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Notes

1. The Greater Cairo Region includes three governorates in Egypt: Cairo, Giza and Qalubia.
2. Renting a 16 × 10 metre billboard on the bridge costs around 200,000 LE (approximately \$12,000) per year (*Muhtwa website*, 2019).

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